Jacobus Cornelius Kapteyn

Born Investigator of the Heavens

Kragh, Helge Stjernholm

Published in:
Journal for the History of Astronomy

Publication date:
2015

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Kragh, H. S. (2015). Jacobus Cornelius Kapteyn: Born Investigator of the Heavens . *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, *416*, 503-504.

and 1940 *was* remarkable in intellectual and social terms, but his account raises questions too. He has based it on wide reading in the secondary and published (but not unpublished) primary literature. There are nevertheless some significant omissions from the secondary literature. Perhaps most important, Hirshfeld has not engaged with the writings of Simon Schaffer, several of which have been very influential for the writing of the history of nineteenth-century astronomy broadly conceived. The import of Schaffer's body of work as well as that of other scholars has been to question and reframe aspects of the usual triumphalist explanations of the development of astronomical drawing and photography, nineteenth-century telescope building, as well as what it meant to be an astronomer or astrophysicist. By drawing on this literature, it would be possible to fashion a rather different account.

Robert W. Smith
University of Alberta

Kapteyn in detail

Jacobus Cornelius Kapteyn: Born Investigator of the Heavens (Astrophysics and Space Science Library, 416). Pieter C. van de Kruit (Springer, Berlin, 2015). Pp. xxiv + 698. €166. ISBN 9783319108759.

Although well known to historians of astronomy, Jacobus C. Kapteyn (1851–1922) hardly belongs to the select group of really famous astronomers including, for example, Johannes Kepler, William Herschel or Arthur Eddington. His important work on the space distribution of stars led, by 1920, to the so-called "Kapteyn universe," but later developments largely made his model of the stellar universe obsolete. An astronomer of the classical school, Kapteyn disregarded the new cosmology based on Einstein's theory of general relativity and further developed by Willem de Sitter – a close associate of Kapteyn's and his first doctoral student. On the other hand, in his own time, Kapteyn was celebrated as not only a pioneer in stellar statistics but also an outstanding authority on stellar and galactic astronomy generally. Among his many honours were the Gold Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society (1902) and the Bruce Medal (1913). He has a star, a minor planet, and a crater on the Moon named after him.

The author of this new and comprehensive biography, Pieter van der Kruit, is an astronomer and former scientific director of the Kapteyn Astronomical Institute in Groningen. His impressively detailed and richly illustrated book covers every conceivable aspect of Kapteyn's life and work, much of it based on extensive archival research. Substantial parts of the book deal with Kapteyn's scientific work and are consequently of a rather technical nature. However, many of the technicalities are placed in boxes separate from the main text, and readers without a background in astronomy will generally face no problems with the book. The division between the technical and non-technical biographical parts works quite well. Van der Kruit deals with Kapteyn's life, family, and travels in great detail, quoting very extensively from the Dutch biography published in 1928 by Kapteyn's second daughter, Henriette Hertzsprung-Kapteyn. A poor and much-criticized English translation by E. Robert Paul appeared in 1993, but van der Kruit relies on his own translation which in its entirety can be found on his website (http://www.astro.rug.nl/JCKapteyn).

The biography of the "born investigator of the heavens" focuses, of course, on Kapteyn, but in addition, it is a rich source on astronomical research in the period and, not least, on Dutch astronomy and academic life. Scientific communication and collaboration are given considerable attention, e.g., in the careful description of the International Congress of Arts and Sciences associated with the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. As a kind of godfather in Dutch astronomy Kapteyn had many students, assistants, and protégés who were or became important figures both nationally and internationally. Among the most prominent were de Sitter, Ejnar Hertzsprung, and Jan Oort. Van der Kruit also describes Kapteyn's close relations with the Mount Wilson Observatory and his instrumental role in setting up the "Dutch pipeline" of talented astronomers to California. The book includes interesting sections on the situation in international astronomy before, during, and shortly after World War I. Contrary to many British, French, and American astronomers, Kapteyn strove to maintain scientific relations with his colleagues in Germany during the war and he vehemently opposed the exclusion of German scientists from the International Research Council founded in 1919.

To call van der Kruit's biography, a tome of more than 700 pages, detailed would be an understatement. The many details are in some way a strength of the book, but they are also a weakness because they make it difficult at times to follow the main story. To my mind, the author does not sufficiently distinguish between what is important and what is not important. Certainly, not *everything* concerning Kapteyn's life and work is of interest. When van der Kruit tells the story of astronomy in Groningen, he starts with Nicolaus Mullerius in the early seventeenth century, and he documents at some length that the first name of Kapteyn's daughter was Henriette and not (as often stated) Henrietta. Over two full pages, he devotes over two full pages to the precise height of Kapteyn, concluding that he was only slightly taller than the average. One wonders of what relevance it is. Nonetheless, van der Kruit's biography is an authoritative and highly valuable contribution to the history of astronomy and a rich source of information concerning Kapteyn and Dutch and international astronomy ca. 1880–1920.

Helge Kragh
Copenhagen University

Corrigendum

Journal for the History of Astronomy
2015, Vol. 46(4) 504

DOI: 10.1177/0021828615613498
jha.sagepub.com

Corrigendum to DOI: 10.1177/0021828615579366

In the review of *William Parsons, 3d Earl of Rosse*, edited by Charles Mollan (August 2015 issue, p. 382), the name of the author of the review should read Stephen Case, not "Chase".